Timur Timofeev

MAY DAY STUDIES IN RUSSIA
(before and after the October Revolution of 1917)

The study of the history of May Day in Russia — from its birth to the present day celebrations — has deep-going traditions.

Lenin's analysis of the May Day actions of the working class in various parts of the Russian empire enabled him to forecast the development of the political situation in the country. Thus noting the unprecedented scope of the May Day strikes in 1912-1914, which put in the forefront political demands, he drew his conclusion about a growing national crisis and the inevitability of its solution by a revolution.

V.I. Lenin was one of the first researchers of May Day. He saw in its celebration under the conditions of the tsarist autocracy first and foremost a barometer of the revolutionary struggle of the working class. For instance, he assessed the May Day strikes of railway workers of Kharkov in 1900 as an outstanding event [1].

After the victory of the October Revolution of 1917 the celebration of May Day acquired a new meaning. When speaking at the Red Square on May 1, 1919, Lenin emphasized that the picture of the celebration of this day of the proletariat had changed not only in Russia [2]. In the conditions of the young Soviet republic Lenin considered May Day as one of the ways of involving the popular masses in tackling the creative tasks of socialist construction. When the working people initiated the celebration of May Day in 1920 as an All-Russia *Subbotnik* and voluntarily participated in work on their day off, Lenin also took part in the working Saturday.

Extensive study of the history of May Day in Russia begins during the first years of Soviet power. Collections of documents, memoirs, eye-witness accounts are printed, and books, brochures, articles are written by writers, journalists and other intellectuals. In 1924, the Museum of Revolution of the Urss published a voluminous bibliographical description, «May Day Leaflets», containing brief characteristics of over 800 leaflets in Russian and other languages beginning with 1890 and up to 1916 [3]. May Day leaflets not only included economic and cultural demands of the Russian proletariat in the broadest sense of the word. They also spoke, in a language easy to understand, of the historic role of the working class, explained its objectives in the struggle for workers' rights and the essence of proletarian internationalism, showed the common features and the specificity of the class struggle. May Day leaflets clearly conveyed the socio-psychological sentiments of the workers. In the leaflet issued on May Day by the Nishny Novgorod Rsdlp (Russian Socialist Democratic Labour Party, the name of the Cpsu during 1898-1917). Committee it was written that the workers did not celebrate May Day with choicest wines and tasty viands, the way rich people used to celebrate their holidays [4]. The Riga Rsdlp Committee emphasized in its leaflet that May Day was not a day of relaxation and pleasure, but a day of struggle of the proletariat of the whole world for their revolutionary slogans [5].

Democratism combined with belief in the power of the working class was characteristic of May Day leaflets. Often the readiness of the working class to rise up in struggle against the autocracy was expressed in an epic form. Striving to awaken anger in the working class with the existing situation and to strengthen their right to power the leaflet issued by the Peterburg Rsdlp Committee proclaimed: «The working people refuse to suffer any longer and they rose up in a protest against unemployment, which ruined utterly tens of thousands of them and brought others to the brink of starvation» [6].

The content of the leaflets reflects the changing character of the appeals and slogans of May Day at various stages of historical development. Commenting on the Russo-Japanese war and World War I, the May Day leaflets called upon the workers not to lose the thread of international solidarity when «hundreds of thousands of soldiers face each other in the enemy ranks, sent to their death...» [7] by the imperialist circles of their countries. It was during these years of severe

trials, in an atmosphere of rampant chauvinism that May Day leaflets also included, along with the demand of an eight-hour working day, the questions of disarmament, of peace among peoples, of political freedoms. During the period or the first Russian revolution of a bourgeois-democratic character, when Tsarism's policy of bloody repressions was combined with small concessions to the working people, May Day leaflets appealed to the class consciousness of the workers, channelling it towards the struggle against Tsarism.

May Day leaflets awakened in the workers a feeling of dignity, a feeling of pride, and told them that they would be victorious. As is generally known, Lenin wrote a numer of leaflets. They became an example of agitational literature. In a few words Lenin concisely defined the essence of the influence of leaflets on the class consciousness of the workers, writing in this connection that even the most backward workers were gripped by the desire to see their revelations printed [8]. The common people of labour adopted the profound conviction of the revolutionary representatives of the working class, and actively took part in the May Day actions.

A collection of documents and materials, «May Day in Tsarist Russia» [9], published during the 1930s, made a significant contribution to the study of the history of May Day in pre-revolutionary Russia. The collection included May Day documents of an agitational character — speeches delivered at May Day rallies, leaflets, appeals issued by local social-democratic organisations, and later published as Party documents; reminiscences of people who had participated in the movement; articles published in the Party press — in the Leninist *Iskra*, in the Bolshevik newspapers *Proletarii* and *Vpered*, etc. A special group of sources was represented by police documents (instructions sent by tsarist authorities to local police chiefs, the latters' reports on the measures taken, etc.) containing indirect data on the preparation and course of May Day demonstrations and strikes, on the militant sentiments of the workers, on their slogans and demands.

During the 1920s and the 1930s, the first historical studies of May Day actions in Russia were published. Some of them — particularly those published soon after the October Revolution — bore the imprint of the time when many people shared the belief in the speedy victory of the world revolution [10]. At the same time, during these years, serious studies reconstructing the actual picture of the development of the May Day movement in Russia also appeared. Of considerable interest is the work of P.N. Lepeshinsky, a prominent figure

in the Russian revolutionary movement, a writer and historian, who was an eye-witness to many events that he later described. The studies of the prominent Party functionary and statesman A.V. Lunacharsky, who devoted a great deal of time and effort to making May Day festivities a monumental and colourful occasion, are also interesting and original. An eminent scholar, writer, theoretician of literature and the arts, he believed that the Day of Proletarian Solidarity should be at the same time a day of visible unity, of theatre performances with multicolour carnivals and grotesque pictures of the most odious figures of the capitalist world, a day of poetry with displays of posters, documentary movies and fireworks combined with the musical aspects of the great workers' festival. Lunacharsky was convinced that the synthesis of all kinds of arts fully corresponds to the general international spirit of May Day. The attempt made by the two outstanding poets — Nikolai Aseev and Vladimir Mayakovsky — to express in a poetic form the history of May Day in Russia reflects the spirit of that time [11].

A comprehensive systematic study of the historical experience and contemporary problems of the May Day movement began at the end of the 1950s, reflecting the broader development of Soviet research devoted to the working class and the labour movement. At the beginning of the 1960s, studies appeared in which the May Day problems received a more comprehensive and in-depth treatment than in the preceeding literature on the subject [12].

The study of the entire range of questions connected with May Day in Russia has noticeably intensified during the 1970s and 1980s. The fundamental eight-volume work *The International Working-Class Movement. Problems of History and Theory* [13], is a major contribution to the study of these problems. Its authors — eminent Soviet scholars — show that the emergence of May Day as a workers' holiday has become an important milestone in the process of the development of the proletariat's class consciousness, in its transformation from «a class in itself» into «a class for itself». Consolidating the principle of international solidarity in the form of May Day, the working class for the first time displayed its qualitative definitiveness in such a graphic form — as an international subject realizing its mission of revolutionary transformer of the old and creator of a new society on a far broader historical scene than the one upon which its antagonist, the bourgeoisie, had been acting. May Day visibly espressed the international nature of the working-class movement, marking, as

Friedrich Engels put it, a clear-cut situation — two fundamentally different and opposing camps: on the one side, the international proletariat advancing to victory under the red banner of emancipation for all; and on the other, the propertied and reactionary classes of all countries, united for the defence of their exploiter privileges [14].

When considering the question of the beginnings of the May Day tradition in Russia, the authors of the multi-volume work deal in detail with the first illegal May Day meeting organised in 1891 in Petersburg by the social-democrats. This May Day meeting marked the entry of the Russian working people into the arena of political struggle under the banner of international proletarian solidarity. The speeches of the workers at the May Day meeting, cited in the multi-volume work, eloquently attested to the awakening class consciousness of the Russian proletariat and its great potential for historic deeds [15].

Tracing the main stages of the development of the May Day movement in Russia, Soviet scholars show that May Day reflected the course of historical events, at the same time influencing them and the class struggle. Of considerable importance for the development of the May Day movement was the revolution of 1905-1907 which made a profound impression on the whole world and greatly contributed to the strengthening of the international solidarity of the working people. The January dispatches from Russia, informing the world of the events of Bloody Sunday, were received by the working class in various countries of Europe with feelings of indignation and anger, of sympathy for the families of the victims of Tsarism and espressions of complete solidarity with the Russian proletariat. Karl Liebknecht called the revolution in Russia a turning point in the history of the European peoples. Rosa Luxemburg, a passionate revolutionary, saw in the Russian revolution a portentuous event of the times which would spread its influence over the whole of Europe, would give an impulse to the class struggle and raise the May Day movement of the working people to a new stage [16].

World War I was a severe trial for the May Day movement in Russia as well as in other countries. The workers of the belligerent states found themselves in opposing camps, even the very right to the existence of the festival of proletarian solidarity was called in question. But even in those difficult conditions the Bolsheviks and the revolutionary Social-Democrats in the West continued to organise May Day actions under the slogans: «Down With the War!», «Long Live the Brotherhood of Peoples!», «Turn the Imperialist War Into Civil War».

As the war continued, the indignation of the popular masses increased and the spirit of proletarian solidarity revived. The February bourgeois-democratic revolution of 1917 in Russia greatly contributed to the development of the internationa solidarity of the working people. The downfall of the Tsarist autocracy, the winning of democratic rights and liberties by the Russian people, including the right to freely celebrate May Day, found a lively response all over the world. In many countries, particularly in Austro-Hungary, Britain, Germany, France and Sweden, the May Day actions of the working people took the form of demonstrations of solidarity with revolutionary Russia, of the determination of the peoples to put an end to the imperialist war. The resolution of a meeting held in Paris on May 1, 1917, in which ten thousand people participated, stated that everywhere the revolutionary peoples should get rid of their governments representing the interest of the ruling classes, and hand over the power to the elected representatives of workers and soldiers who had taken the side of the people. It emphasized that the Russian revolution was a signal to world revolution, which would consolidate the final triumph of the Russian revolution [17].

At their meeting, thirty thousand London workers declared on the day of international proletarian solidarity, that unless an end was put to the war, the workers, like their comrades in Russia, would take matters into their own hands [18].

The Great October Socialist Revolution opened a qualitatively new stage in the celebration of May Day, in the development of the international solidarity of the working people. Henceforth, in its struggle for its rights and liberties, the international proletariat could count on the assistance of the young Soviet state, which, in its turn, was supported by the working class of other countries. The Soviet working people fulfilled their international duty in various forms — from actions in defense of the victims of fascism and reaction through diplomatic channels, to economic assistance, to the granting of asylum, to large groups of anti-fascists, to personal contribution by hundreds of thousands of people to the struggle of Republican Spain against fascism and of the Chinese people against the Japanese invaders. Considerable economic assistance and moral support was rendered by the Soviet working people to the English miners in the 1926 general strike. In 1929 the Soviet working people expressed their resolute protest at the shooting down of the May Day demonstration of German workers on the orders of the Polizei-President of Berlin K. Zörgiebel, a Social

Democrat. The Soviet working people raised their voice against the reprisals of the Austrian authorities aimed at the participants of the Vienna uprising in February 1934.

After the October Revolution, the process of the emergence of Communist parties began in different countries. Together with the workers' organizations they played an active role in the development of the May Day traditions which embraced new countries and continents [19].

In the conditions of the socialist state, May Day acquired a great educational significance, became a stimulus for the development of the creative activity and initiative of the popular masses in production. May Day ushered in the tradition of honouring the workers who distinguished themselves in production. In 1923 the tradition to mark the May Day celebrations with new achievementes in work acquired a great scope. May Day was conducive to mobilizing the popular masses to accomplish the tasks of socialist contruction-industrialization, restructuring of agricolture, a cultural revolution. During the war years May Day was declared a working day. May Day served as a factor in the creation of the prerequisites for ensuring the material and technical superiority over fascist Germany. The chief May Day slogan was: « All for the Front, All for Victory! » This slogan inspired many initiatives in production.

The victory over fascism created new opportunities for the development of the May Day movement. The multi-volume study shows, on a documentary basis, how with the emergence of the world socialist system, with the peoples of formerly colonial countries entering the historical arena, with the growth of mass democratic movements, May Day significantly enlarged its scope, became a festival of the international solidarity of the working people of the whole world. Today, May Day in the Ussr is not only a review of labour achievements, but also an espression of solidarity with the labour movement and all the progressive forces in the West, with the peoples of developing countries in their struggle against imperialism, neo-colonialism, dictatorial regimes and apartheid, for economic independence and a just international economic order. At present, when the danger of a thermonuclear war looms over humankind, when global problems affecting the very foundations of the existence of civilization have become exacerbated, the struggle for the preservation of life on Earth is becoming the main May Day slogan. The humanism of May Day, its new socio-historical meaning in the con-

temporary epoch, is vividly revealed by the affirmation of general human values, the most important of which is the right to life.

The publication of the eight-volume study *International Working-Class Movement. Problems of History and Theory* has greatly contributed to stimulating research of historical experience and current problems of the labour movement, including the problems of the May Day movement. During the 1980s a number of new books, brochures, articles, documentary publications have been added to Soviet literature on May Day [20]. Among them, mention should be made of a new edition of the reminiscences of P. Zalomov, — one of the first Russian Worker Social-Democrats, the organizer of the Sormovo May Day demonstration, who was the prototype for Pavel Vlasov in Maxim Gorky's novel «Mother» [21]. This publication afforded an opportunity to consider many questions and stereotypes, relating to the May Day events of that period, from the positions of contemporary evaluations and interpretations.

The centennial of May Day, being celebrated beginning with 1986 and during the next few years all over the world, has stimulated a more in-depth study of May Day problems. This important date has seen the publication of a number of studies and articles prepared by researchers of the Institute of International Labour Movement of the Ussr Accademy of Sciences [22]. Numerous documents prepared for publication by the Institute reflect the long road travelled by the May Day movement in the USSR and abroad since its inception one hundred years ago [23].

When elaborating upon the problems of the May Day movement, Soviet researchers closely follow scientific studies in this sphere in other countries of the world. The publication in Russian of the books by the French historian A. Rossel and by D. Fricke, a German scholar, by Philip Foner, and other foreign scholars was received with great interest by the Soviet readers.

Many new publications devoted to the problems of the May Day history were issued in various Soviet cities in 1987 in connection with the 70th anniversary of the October Revolution. Among others, the Moscow press cited documents dating back to 1917. For instance, among announcements prepared by workers' organisations in the spring of 1917, were reproduced recently the following texts: «On Saturday, April 15 (1917) at 7 p.m. the session of the Council of the Workers' deputies of the Presnensky district will be convened. On the agenda — the question of the organisation of May Day rally».

And another one: «On April 16 at 3 P.m. in room 30 of the former mansion of the Governor-General it will be convened a meeting of all, who want to take part in choral singing during the May Day Festival...» [24]. At that time, over one million workers and office employees took part in the May Day festivities in Moscow, many of them with families; also many soldiers took part in them. The Moscow Newspaper *Social-Democrat* editorialized in its issue on May 1, 1917: «*May Day is the day of revolutionary solidarity of proletariat fighting for peace... This is the festival of the revolutionary struggle for socialism. Today we go into the streets as the class united in the whole world, in the whole world opposed to the forces of capitalism*» [25].

Exchange of opinions and information on the state of the studies on May Day took place during the international scientific conferences: «The Working Class and Our Time» (convened in Moscow, October 1986) and «70 Years of October Revolution and Trade Union Movement Today» (May, 1987). These and other gatherings prove that the May Day banners were raised high, and that by celebrating the May Day traditions the working people in different countries are fighting for a healthier international climate, for the comprehensive system of international security.

Many of the participants to these conferences expressed a wish to continue developing scientific cooperation in the study of May Day both from the historical and the contemporary aspects. Such cooperation would undoubtedly further the realization of international projects on the occasion of the May Day centennial.

1. V.I. Lenin, *Predislovie k brošjure «Majskie dni v Char'kove»*. In: *Polnoe sobranie sočinenij*, t. 4, s. 364.
2. *Ibid.*, t. 38, s. 323.
3. *Pervomajskie proklamacii. Bibliografičeskoe opisanie*. Leningrad, 1924.
4. *Ibid.*, s. 34 (N. 283).
5. *Ibid.*, s. 58 (N. 571).
6. *Ibid.*, s. 17 (N. 90).
7. *Ibid.*, s. 27 (N. 193).
8. V.I. Lenin, *Čto delat'?*. In: *Polnoe sobranie sočinenij*, t. 6, s. 54.
9. *Pervoe maja v zarskoj Rossii. Sbornik dokumetov i materialov*. Moskva, 1939.
10. See, for instance: P.M. Keržencev, *Pervoe maja i mirovaja revolucija*. Char'kov, 1919.

11. N. Aseev - V. Majakovskij, *Pervyi pervomaj*. Leningrad, 1926.

12. *Iz istorii prazdonovanija Pervogo maja*, in: *Novaja i novejsaja istorija*, 1960, n. 3. G.A. Pocebut, *Pervomaj (K 70-letiju prazdnovanija pervoj revoljucionnoj maevki v Rossii)*. Leningrad, 1961.

13. *Mezdunarodnoe rabocee dvizenie. Voprosy istorii i teorii*. T. I-VIII, Moskva, 1976-1985.

14. F. Engels, *Ispanskim rabocim k pervomu maja 1893 goda*. In: Marx-Engels, *Socinenija*. Isdanie vtoroe, t. 22, s. 423.

15. *Mezdunarodnoe rabocee dvizenie*, t. 2, s. 270.

16. *Ibid.*, t. 3, s. 295.

17. *Ibid.*, t. 3, s. 651-652.

18. *Ibid.*, t. 4, s. 658, s. 657-666.

20. *Ot Marksa do nasich dnej. Istoriceskie tradicii proletarskogo internacionalizma*. T.I-2, Moskva, 1982. D.E. Rudoj - G.N. Cistiakov, *Prazdnik mezdunarodnoj solidarnosti trudjascichsja*. Moskva, 1985. T.G. Zagladina, *Pervomaj v dooktjabr'skoj Rossii*, in: *Rabocij klass i sovremenyj mir*, 1981, n. 1.

21. P. Zalomov, *Zaprescennje ljudi*. Moskva, 1985.

22. O.N. Melnikov, *Znamja Pervomaja - internacionalizm*. Moskva, 1986. V.E. Petrovskij, *Pervomaj - prazdnik internacional'noj solidarnosti trudjascichsja*. Moskva, 1986. A.F. Chramzov, *Prazdnik proletarskoj solidarnosti*. Moskva, 1986.

23. *Na zare Pervomaja. Dokumenty i materialy*, in: *Kommunist*, 1986, n. 7. *U istokov Pervomaja. Dokumenty i svidetel'stva sovremennikov*, in: *Voprosy istorii Kpss*, 1986, n. 5. *K stoletiju Pervogo maja — prazdnika mezdunarodnoj solidarnosti trudjascichsja. Dokumenty i vospominanija*, in: *Istorija Sssr*, 1986, n. 3. *Iz Istorii Pervomaja za rubeom v konce XIX — nacale XXV*, in: *Novaja i novejsaja itorija*, 1986, n. 3. *Pervoe Maja v dokumentach i svidetel' stvach sovremennikov*, in: *Rabocij klass i sovremennyj mir*, 1986, n. 4-5, 1987, n. 2.

24. See: A. Jastrebov, *Maj 1917. 70 let nazad trudjascjesja Rossii vpervyie svobodno otmetili I Maja*, in: *Vecernaja Moskva*, 30. 4. 1987, s. 2.

25. *Ibid.*